

Against the Grain

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Issues in Vendor/Library Relations -- "I Am the Only Bay of Pigs Librarian"

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the thundercloud, and it's so simple it's mind-boggling:

We no longer teach young people how to read.

And therein lies the saddest story ever told. For the past thirty-something years our schools have followed — and parents of young children with them — just about every conceivable harebrained reading scheme there is, and all of them with the same effect: young people leave elementary school either not knowing how to read, or knowing it only marginally, and hating it eternally. Part of this failure has to do with schools' love of the new, but more of it has to do with the way we fund education. Anything old-seeming we despise and will not fund, forcing tried and proven methods to die of funding starvation. Meanwhile, any educator with a scheme and a glib tongue can get millions of dollars for any experiment that involves the nation's youth. We do this with reading, with math, and with science. The end result has been that more and more of our young people cannot read, write, spell, add, subtract, or divide. (Oddly, they do know how to multiply, but that's a different rant.)

While I worry about the others, it is reading that bothers me the most. If a person knows how to read, he or she can do most anything. Obversely, if they cannot read, it is likely that their future will be bleak. Of course, exceptions exist to every generalization, but, by and large, a good predictor of poverty is not knowing how to read. Sadly, we know how to teach young people to read; we're simply not doing a very good job of it (in case you're interested, a great new book on this topic is *Dehaene's Reading and the Brain*, Viking, 2009).

This is not an issue about which we can simply throw our hands up in surrender. If young people aren't reading — and we know they are not — we are, all of us, in a great deal of trouble. It isn't that libraries will eventually disappear: of course, they will. It isn't because bookstores will all eventually close: of course, they certainly shall, and sooner than later as we Boomers die off. And it isn't because universities like the one where I earn my living will eventually become artifacts: of course, they will, and *online* learning is hastening the day they become relics. It is because the culture of these United States will disappear.

Now, I know some reading this will think that day cannot come soon enough for political reasons that have nothing to do with reading. The only thing I can say to them is that you never really know what have until you no longer have it, and as proof of this assertion I have only to point them back to their youths. To those less political, I can say only that reading is the lifeblood of our culture and preservation of our heritage. If we let this slip through our fingers, we will lose more than we realize. I fear we'll discover too soon that where we end up will be a very uncomfortable, very unpleasant, lunatic fringe. 🐷

Issues in Vendor/Library Relations — “I Am the Only Bay of Pigs Librarian”

Column Editor: **Bob Nardini** (Group Director, Client Integration and Head Bibliographer, Coutts Information Services) <bnardini@couttsinfo.com>

Column Editor's Note: *The business end of “vendor/library relations” sits on a foundation of personal relationships and friendships that, for both librarian and vendor, can be among the most fulfilling parts of a job. And among the most enjoyable, there's no doubt. For most of the 1990s and a little beyond, I looked forward to my regular visits to Miami and Florida International University, where the Head of Collections, Salvador Miranda, was among the best raconteurs I have ever had the pleasure of knowing.*

Sal had probably the most remarkable career of any librarian I've met. He grew up in Havana, Cuba. He was a member of the Bay of Pigs invasion force in 1961. He settled in the United States and, with his “Cuban thermostat,” suffered the cold in Philadelphia, where at Villanova University he turned what had been a childhood hobby into an M.A. thesis. Later, at FIU, as a “paper librarian” in the early days of our electronic era, he turned that thesis into an online resource that won him an invitation to visit Rome and that launched a worldwide correspondence that continues today. He is still developing “The Cardinals of the Holy Roman Church,” by now a lifework, that anyone can consult — and many thousands have — at <http://www.fiu.edu/~mirandas/cardinals.htm>.

*Sal retired in 2001 to his condominium on Miami's South Beach, where we were able to enjoy a recent evening together and where Sal agreed to share a few of his stories and some thoughts on collection development with *Against the Grain*. — BN*

BN: *You were a member of the Bay of Pigs invasion force. That must have been an episode in your life that's unforgettable. You once told me a story about a column of tanks. Do you mind telling it again?*

SM: Having participated in the Bay of Pigs invasion, believe it or not, has been a very positive experience. I still benefit from what I learned there. I was only twenty-one and had had a very protected life, because I went to a private Jesuit school in Cuba, and I thought everybody in the world was like my classmates. And then all of a sudden I decided to take part in this, and I thought it was the right step to try to change the future of my country of origin.

Of course I have many, many stories during those days. But the one that I always remember is one time that I had a bazooka, and an auxiliary, who was the guy who put the rocket in the bazooka, and the shooter fires. One day we were walking in the front of the Bay of Pigs near a dirt road and all of a sudden one of the guys who were right before us warned us that there was a column of like twenty tanks coming our way. And of course a bazooka is the best weapon against a tank.

And I said well, at least we will take care of the first one, so that the road is blocked, and the other tanks cannot advance, because there were swamps on both sides, and there was no way that the other nineteen could move to the front. And I saw the first tank approaching us. Then all of a sudden it stopped. And I don't know for what reason, I prefer to defer to Divine Providence, they turned around and never came. So that was a sign that I was going to stay in this world.

BN: *Years ago when you told me that story you said that at that moment, you guessed it meant that you were meant to run an approval plan.*

SM: As far as I know, I am the only Bay of Pigs librarian.

BN: *A few years later, you ended up in this country as a student in Philadelphia, where your Master's thesis at Villanova was a project you had begun as a boy in Havana. Would you talk about that a little bit?*

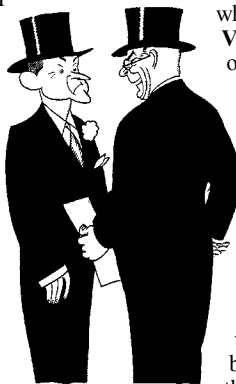
SM: I can tell you the date on which I became interested in the College of Cardinals of the Catholic Church. I was always interested in reading the news, and, in 1954, when I was thirteen years old, I read in the paper in Havana that a cardinal had died in Rome, and he was on the front page of the newspaper. And I said, who is this guy that gets so much coverage? I read about him, and it sparked my interest, not only in that particular person, but in the office of the Cardinals.

So I did my first real cut-and-paste. I cut the newspaper clipping and pasted it in a scrapbook. And I continued. At first it was a very immature research. I guess when my classmates were collecting and trading baseball players' cards, I was cutting-and-pasting news about the cardinals. And I still have one of the pages of the scrapbook from 1955 with the news of the death of the Cardinal of Vienna. So I continued in a kind of youthful research. Then when I came more or less to the realization that it was an important if somewhat restricted or unique topic, I had already prepared biographies of all the cardinals of the twentieth century, which at that time were three hundred and something. Sometime later, when I went to get my Master's degree at Villanova one had to write a thesis on an original topic, if you wanted to continue towards the Ph.D. And I talked about it with my thesis director, and he accepted the idea, so the cardinalate in the twentieth century became my Master's thesis.

Then, twenty years later, in the computer era, I was a librarian at Florida International University in Miami and went to the systems department of the university to have my thesis digitized. They told me to come back in three or four days and they had the thesis, which was 319 pages long, scanned. Then, I spent innumerable days “cleaning it up” because of the foreign names of cardinals from all over the world.

In 1998, I put the dissertation in a worksite at

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FIU. And the rest is history. I still have the site, and in the six years since I started counting the visitors, it has received more than one million hits. So even though it is sort of an obscure topic, there is a great deal of interest in it. The visitors to the site are from all over the world. I receive numerous emails every day, fortunately most of them in English, or at least in a western European language, with questions, corrections, comments, pictures. The correspondents range from the **Vatican** and the **British Museum** to someone who thinks they have an uncle who was a cardinal and wants me to help identify him. Of course, everybody has an uncle who was a cardinal. They want me to tell them about him, and I do not find the supposed prelate anywhere!

BN: *You've worked your way back in time, I believe. What century are you in now?*

SM: I am working on the 10th century. This morning I posted the biographies of the cardinals who were named in 964. Yes, I go backwards, because I started with my thesis, which covered the cardinals from 1903 to 1973, and I wasn't going to do any more than that. But then I started receiving emails asking, "When are the others coming?" I had the biographies of the cardinals from the 17th to the 19th century, but I had prepared them many years ago and in Spanish. So I had to translate and edit them, and started putting them on the web page, going backwards. So it has been backwards since the beginning. But now I have more than a millennium of the cardinals on the site. And I'm fortunate, grateful for the generosity of **FIU** for giving me all of the space I need on their server, which is huge, as well as technical support.

BN: *You were even, because of this project, invited to visit the Vatican. Is that right?*

SM: Yes, that is right. In 1972 I started corresponding with a priest-journalist, **Fr. Cipriano Calderón**, who was the founding director of the Spanish edition of the **Vatican** newspaper, which is called *L'Osservatore Romano*. For years we corresponded because he was also very interested in the topic of the cardinals. In 1988, he was named a bishop, and vice president of the Pontifical Commission for Latin America. In 1999 the **Vatican** decided to celebrate the hundredth anniversary of a very important meeting, the first continental meeting of bishops from Latin America. The bishop invited me to submit what is called a "communication," which is something smaller than a formal, long paper. And he invited me to participate in the meeting. The **Vatican** covered all expenses, travel and accommodations. I was there for two weeks. And it was very interesting because all the participants in the symposium stayed in a building inside of the **Vatican** which is called Casa Santa Marta, "House of Saint Martha." In 1996, **Pope John Paul II** decided that it was going to be the building where the cardinals would stay for the conclave. They take the votes in the Sistine Chapel, but in the day they reside, eat and sleep in Casa Santa Marta. So I was ahead of them, because it was a new structure that hadn't been used yet for a conclave, because this was in 1999, and the next conclave was not until 2005, after **Pope John Paul II** died. So it was very significant for me. And I had the opportunity of meeting a lot of cardinals, bishops, and priests from Latin America.

BN: *Who once had a meal down the street from you in Miami Beach, as I recall.*

SM: Yes, yes. There was a meeting here in Miami, and several cardinals came. It was an ecclesiastical meeting. They had a dinner here in one of the hotels in Miami Beach, on Ocean Drive, my street. So I went to the hotel of course, and I recognized several of them, the Cardinal from Puerto Rico, and the Cardinal from Lima, in Peru, and the Cardinal from Santo Domingo, just there at the hotel. I visited them before, now they are coming to the beach!

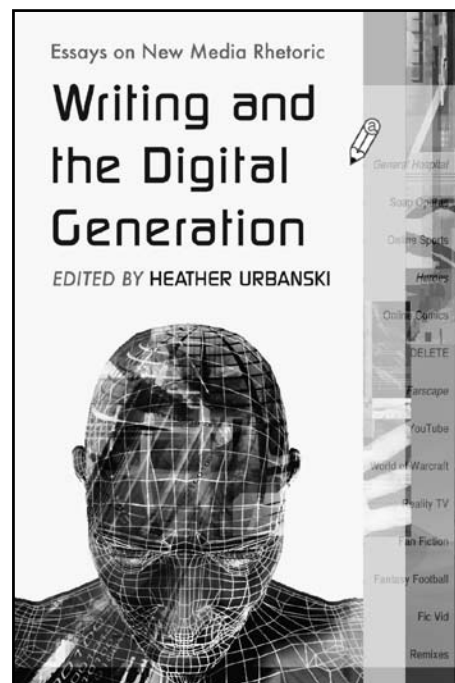
BN: *During your years as a collections librarian at the University of Florida and at Florida International University, aside from your database, what accomplishment are you proudest of?*

SM: It was at **FIU**, because in Gainesville I was Latin American bibliographer, and the Latin American collection in Gainesville was already recognized around the world. It had the status symbol from the time, the printed catalogs of the special collections. Texas had one, and Tulane had one, and Miami had one, and of course Florida had one. So I just continued what had been done, since at least the beginning of the Farmington Plan, in 1947, I think it was.

But then I came to **FIU** and was the first collection development librarian. So I had the opportunity of starting everything from scratch, which for me was great. I know that there are people who prefer to continue in the structure that already existed. This was a challenge, but gave me the opportunity to create a whole new structure. I worked very closely with the faculty, trying to develop and organize a collection that didn't exist. When I went to **FIU** there were two Ph.D. programs, Public Administration and Psychology — Developmental Psychology — and a few Master's programs. I would not know how many doctoral and Master's programs they have now. I was there during all that great time of growth and expansion and had to develop the collection in all those fields. I always told the faculty I am the G.P., you're the specialists. We have to work together, and this way we will have a good collection that supports your research and your students' needs.

It was a fantastic way of creating the structures, having to work with each one of the academic departments from Biology to Theater, to all the Engineering and Computer Science programs, as well as Hospitality Management and Nursing. For me, it was a great fifteen years.

BN: *What would you say the greatest chal-*



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lenge your successor in that same job faces today?

SM: It's what I was already experiencing, because I retired in 2001: the impact of electronic media, and the decision between paper or electronic format, and the percentages of the budget allocated for them. I remember in my time even, **ALA** recommended that ten percent of the materials budget be spent for electronic format. I hope that now they spend as much as ten percent for print. Certainly, many things really make sense only to have in electronic, like all the scientific and technical journals, as well as most of the reference works. And now **FIU** has a School of Medicine and a School of Law, which was being founded when I left. I always say I am a paper librarian, but you can see that my main work is in the electronic format: the Website of the cardinals. And it is the perfect medium for that, because it is a living body that is constantly changing, so I can keep it up-to-date. And this is true with all the other disciplines that move much faster than maybe history or social science. So it is necessary to strike a balance because, at the same time, there is a great deal of information and knowledge that only is available in paper form, and even more that was created before the electronic medium appeared.

BN: *Tell us what the weather is like today on the South Beach.*

SM: Beautiful!

BN: *Have you taken a walk yet?*

SM: Yes, 8 o'clock in the morning, three miles on the sand.

BN: *Thanks very much, Sal.* 🐼